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Worker's Paradise Has National Hangover

According to Karl Marx, religion is the opium of the people. But in the Soviet showcase of Marxism, there is evidence that many people, deprived of religious opiates, are turning to the real thing.

As with everything else in the Soviet Union, reliable figures on drug abuse are hard to get, but the government's official figures are laughable. The Kremlin reported there were 15,000 registered drug users in the entire country in 1978, but intelligence experts estimate that there are perhaps 40,000 junkies in the republic of Georgia.

One expert on the Soviet Union told my associate Bob Sherman that heavy drug use is still a relatively minor problem for Soviet police, whose resources are devoted to tracking political dissent.

"Needle drugs like morphine, usually stolen from a hospital or dry goods store, sell for about 2.5 rubles (\$2.75) an ampule and opium for 3 rubles (\$3.30) per ampule," the analyst said. "There is little cocaine available, although some is produced in Soviet Georgia."

The chaos that has engulfed Southeast Asia and the Middle East has affected the drug traffic in the Soviet Union just as in the Western world. Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan have replaced the Indochinese "Golden Triangle" as the major source of smuggled heroin. Production and traffic have spread north into the Soviets' Central Asian republics, according to intelligence sources.

Marx had no slick aphorism for alcohol, but its consumption has given the Soviet Union a national hangover. From a pre-Revolution per capita consumption of 7.75 liters of vodka in 1913, the 1968 figures show that 9.1 liters of vodka

were drunk for every man, woman and child in the Soviet Union. By 1972, the per capita consumption had risen to 10.8 liters — and that's not counting illegally produced spirits.

The effect of alcohol consumption on Soviet society is hard to estimate; its effect on the economy is clearly staggering. Western analysts reckon that 27 percent of the money Soviet citizens spend on food and drink goes for hard liquor, which accounts for 15 percent of all purchases of any kind.

The Kremlin is on the horns of a dilemma when it comes to booze. Ideologically, the Soviet government disapproves of liquor consumption, a need for which belies the supposed idyll of life in a communist paradise. It conducts endless, heavy-handed propaganda campaigns against Demon Vodka.

But as a practical matter, the government liquor monopoly makes a hefty profit. In fact, Western experts believe the Soviet budget would shrink by 11 percent if the government liquor industry were shut down.